

HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT OTHERS?

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Abstract:

“How Do We Think About Others?” uses the short story, “Thank You M’am”, as a starting point for the analysis of contemporary issues in Puerto Rico. “Thank You M’am” was written by Langston Hughes, an acclaimed American writer. The story focuses on an unexpected reaction to a crime. “How Do We Think About Others?” explores important aspects like crimes committed by young people and who is to blame in such crimes. The essay also poses questions about stigmatizing people for their past mistakes.

Keywords: storytelling, crime, youngsters, prejudice

Resumen:

El ensayo, “How Do We Think About Others?” utiliza el cuento corto, “Thank You M’am”, como punto de partida para el análisis de problemas contemporáneos en Puerto Rico. El mismo fue escrito por Langston Hughes, escritor y poeta americano. El cuento presenta la reacción inesperada de una mujer tras un crimen. “How Do We Think About Others?” explora algunos aspectos importantes como la incidencia de crímenes cometidos por jóvenes. Además, el ensayo demuestra cómo en ocasiones juzgamos demasiado rápido.

Palabras claves: cuentista, crimen, jóvenes, prejuicios

How Do We Think About Others?

Langston Hughes was an American poet, novelist, and playwright whose African-American themes made him a primary contributor to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. In 1925, his poem “The Weary Blues” won first prize in the *Opportunity* magazine literary competition, and he received a scholarship to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He published the poem “The Weary Blues” (1925) and the collection of poems titled *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) in this period. Hughes published his first novel, *Not without Laughter*, right after his graduation from Lincoln in 1929. With these early works readers and critics came to know Hughes for his strong and sometimes controversial commitment to offering challenging representations of African-American themes and cultural heritage.

Many of Hughes’s works were inspired by his life in New York City’s Harlem. In 1958, he published the collection of short stories called *Something in Common*. One of the stories included in it is “Thank you M’am.” This short story depicts a young boy named Roger who tries to steal a woman’s pocketbook, but just after committing this crime he loses his balance and falls to the ground. The woman reacts in an unusual way. The boy is sweating bullets thinking the woman is going to take him to jail, but instead she takes the child to her apartment and gives him food because she senses that he attempted to steal because he was hungry. At one point she states, “You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?” From that moment on, Hughes portrays Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, the woman at the center of the story, as a typical mother or grandmother who is nurturing and at the same time, firm.

“Thank you M’am” made me face various questions concerning how I would react if I were in a situation similar to the one in which the story’s characters find themselves. Would I have done what Mrs. Jones did? I became curious about how usual and frequent cases like this are and how they develop, if at all, in recent years. After completing some research on the Internet, I found a case close to home that is very similar to “Thank You, M’am.” As reported in Puerto Rico’s main newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, in September 2011, a seventeen year-old boy was arrested after snatching an older woman’s purse in the town of Morovis. In this case, the boy is about two years older than Roger, given that Hughes describes him as looking like he was fourteen or fifteen. According to the article, he approached an eighty-nine year old woman, quickly grabbed her purse, and hid in a nearby forested area. I found other similar cases involving teenage

boys committing theft in San Juan, ones in which they steal not only purses but also cell phones and iPods. This made me think twice about whether I would have done what Mrs. Jones did. But the outcomes in these cases were not the same. In these cases, the young boys faced legal repercussions, not at all like the story. The way these incidents unfolded in contemporary Puerto Rico led me to another question: What factors drove Mrs. Jones to her actions?

Mrs. Jones is depicted as a wise and insightful woman. She assumed that the boy was good at heart. In fact, Mrs. Jones mentions several times that his face is dirty and he is described as “frail and willow-wild.” Also, when she asks if he had eaten his supper, the boy tells her that there is no one at his house. These factors led Mrs. Jones to think that the boy was stealing her pocketbook because he was hungry. Apparently this is what she believes drove him to make a mistake even though he said that he tried to steal from her because he wanted to buy some blue suede shoes. At a crucial moment, she left the door of her apartment open but the boy did not run away even though he wanted to. We could speculate that maybe Roger did not leave Mrs. Jones’s apartment because staying could mean filling the absence of his parents with Mrs. Jones’s attention. This might have let her know that he was really an innocent boy who deserved her attention and a second chance.

On the other hand, Roger did do something that could be punishable by law, but is he really guilty? The story takes place in a sidewalk at eleven o’ clock at night. What was a fourteen to fifteen year-old boy doing out at that hour without adult supervision? Where were his parents? According to the story, there was no one at Roger’s house and by the description of his condition it seems that they have not been there for a while. I believe that most of the blame falls on Roger’s parents because it is their responsibility to take care of him and lead him down a good path. The blame not only falls on his parents but also on other adults that know about this and do nothing about it.

Finally, I am not sure if I would have done what Mrs. Jones did, but that is precisely what I find most significant of this story. “Thank You, M’am” makes the readers question how they think about other people, especially people who have made some mistakes in the past. We are all allowed to make mistakes and that allow us to learn, but society is often unforgiving. Many times people quickly put a damaging and highly stigmatizing stamp on those who make a bad decision. In this case, the mistake is attempted petty theft. Should responsible members of the community allow this to happen? To do something like Mrs. Jones takes courage and the ability to look past faults. After putting a lot of thought into the matter, I

am compelled to recognize that when faced with the real life situation I should now remember Mrs. Jones.